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**Voting Experience and Perceived Media Impact  
Second- and Third-Person-Effects of Political Communication in Germany**

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**Voting Experience and Perceived Media Impact**  
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- ABSTRACT -

The notion that people believe others to be more susceptible for media impact than themselves has attracted substantial scholarly interest in recent years. The present paper reports on the first field study of the third-person effect in Germany. On occasion of the Federal election campaign in 2002, a survey determined respondent's belief of how strongly the general public, their friends and family, and their own person was affected by six different sorts of communication sources. Results confirm the perceptual component of the third-person concept (including the social distance and the message desirability hypothesis) but fail to prove effects on the behavioural intention of voters. The magnitude of perceptual gaps is influenced by a person's voting experience, with first-time voters displaying smaller differences in impact assessments. But the part of media use and political involvement in this process of political communication is still unclear and requires further research.

**First-time Voters and Perceived Media Impact**  
**Second- and Third-Person-Effects of Political Communication in Germany**

Among the implications of mass communication for society, the notion of a third-person effect (TPE) on people's perceptions of how susceptible others are for media impact has attracted substantial scholarly interest in recent years. Since Davison (1983) introduced the idea that people perceive others to be affected more and more easily by messages than they are themselves, this relationship has proven to be robust, although its magnitude varies (for a meta-analysis see Paul, Salwen & Dupagne, 2000). Earlier research has ruled out that the differences found in people's estimations are a mere methodological artefact evoked by the research instrument itself (Price & Tewksbury, 1996). Among the reasons given for this perceptual gap, psychological processes such as the 'self-serving bias' from attribution theory (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990), 'unrealistic optimism' and 'impersonal impact' were both supported empirically and seem to interact when people make judgments about media impact (Brosius & Engel, 1996). Beyond this perceptual component, a smaller number of studies have investigated the behavioural component of TPE, expressed in people's willingness to support action (usually authorities' restrictions in order to protect 'others') which is supposed to increase with the magnitude of their perceptual differential. Most early studies concentrated on support of censorship (for an overview see also Lee & Tamborini, 2005), but the evidence of a link between perceptions and other (intended) behaviour is mixed at least (Jensen & Hurley, 2005 for further references).

While most of the empirical research on TPE was conducted in the U.S. so far, the present study is the second to analyze people's perceptions of media effects in Germany, following the experimental study of Brosius & Engel (1996) carried out more than ten years ago. Scholars have already argued that cultural factors might influence the nature and magnitude of TPE (Lee & Tamborini, 2005: 295-297). Although the U.S. and Germany both can be described as highly industrialized and relatively wealthy Western democracies, substantial differences in the German media system compared to the U.S. (see e.g. Humphreys, 1994) raise the question whether the convincing results obtained for the American audience can easily be generalized to another cultural background. The same is true for the varying nature of the political system, as the present study focuses particularly on the perception of media effects on political opinion building. While the

phenomenon has been documented across many types of media content (e. g. pornography, hate speech, rap lyrics, news, and advertising; see Lambe & McLeod, 2005 for further references), the field of political communication is, apart from a few studies on negative campaign advertising, rarely investigated in TPE research (for exceptions see Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; Meirick, 2004). From the broad range of factors influencing the TPE which were identified in studies so far, we emphasize the relevance of message desirability and the social distance of the comparison group. Our main research question asks whether the influence of the TPE differs between first-time voters and experienced voters during a campaign, thus exerting an influence on individual attitudes and opinions towards politics.

#### Differences in Perceived Media Impact and Voting: a Research Model

The notion of „the ‚other‘ as the vulnerable voter” (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990) gains popularity especially in times of political campaigns. Politicians, but experts and journalists themselves, too, assume that media coverage plays a crucial role for political opinion building in general and during elections in particular (see e.g. McLeod et al., 2002). TV debates of candidates may serve to illustrate the sensitivity of this issue: To prevent an expected manipulation of viewers perceived as highly susceptible to debate messages, the debates televised in Germany were regulated by a long list of rules and arrangements between the opponents, allowing for limited individualism in presentation only. Nevertheless, both observers of the 2002 and 2005 debates and pollsters attributed a high impact to the media events that were broadcast simultaneously by all main networks and attracted more than 20 million in front of German TV sets (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2005; Der Spiegel, 2005).

Altogether, TPE are likely to occur in the field of politics for several reasons: First, most of the political process is communicated by media, and for a majority of the population media coverage remains the only (or at least the most important) source for political information. Second, especially during campaigns political issues climb on top of the public agenda, thus indicating the relevance of the issue and putting people under pressure to form an opinion. Third, politics should represent a realm relevant for processes of social comparison, given the ideal of an informed citizen. And finally, with respect to the behavioural component of TPE, voting is a civil duty guided by moral and legal imperatives: Elections should be free, secret, and give equal opportunities to all voters, and

one may expect a considerable readiness to protect the greatest good in Western democracies against manipulation by mass media.

If applied to political media content, the TPE concept suggests that some of the factors identified by earlier research to influence the effect could be particularly significant (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990; see recently Jensen & Hurley, 2005 in the case of environmental issues):

Social distance of the comparison group has proven to be a decisive moderator of TPE perceptions throughout all empirical studies (see Paul, Salwen & Dupaigne, 2000). Defining social distance as the degree of similarity between self and others, the perceptual difference increases as others become more socially distant from self (e.g. Eveland et al., 1999; Cohen et al., 1988). Although comparison groups have occasionally been varied in terms of demographic characteristics (age, race etc.), in most cases social distance is operationalized by the generality of the group, from close acquaintances to the broad public opinion at large. Much of the empirical validity attributed to the perceptual hypothesis is based on the fact that studies continuously reproduced the linear increase of difference values with increasing social distance (Perloff, 2002).

Desirability of the media content is another relevant contextual variable that influences the occurrence of TPE: Implicitly, empirical studies tend to rely on undesirable messages (like pornography or advertising) for examining perceptual differences. This refers to the psychological processes mentioned above which are more likely to occur when the assumed media impact is supposed to be negative, and the same notion justifies the call for censorship etc. in the behavioural component of TPE. In contrast, the requirement to include impact assertions of desirable media content to test the perceptual hypothesis was emphasized rarely (Paul et al., 2000). Again, empirical evidence is mixed – some studies in fact found that respondents attributed a greater effect on others for undesirable messages (cigarette ads) and a greater effect on themselves for desirable messages (antismoking PSAs; Henriksen & Flora, 1999). Following the notion that perceptions of desirability may rather be a function of people's individual attitudes towards the message than a general characteristic of a message (Salwen & Dupaigne, 1999: 524), recent studies suggested a positive correlation between desirability and effects on self (Jensen & Hurley, 2005) while others failed to do so (Lambe & McLeod, 2005 with degree of antisocialness as an indicator for desirability).

Other moderating factors can be identified from earlier TPE research and the nature of the present topic (political media content). Older persons have demonstrated a larger discrepancy

between perceived media impact on self and others (Brosius & Engel, 1996: 143). On the other hand, “higher levels of education correspond to higher levels of the third-person effect [...] Thus, education may enhance feelings of superiority rather than fostering greater accuracy” (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990: 363). Media use patterns, particularly frequency of exposure, have also qualified sometimes as relevant predictors of perceptual differences (Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Price et al., 1997; Rucinski & Salmon, 1990). But as reviews in general neglect a direct influence of traditional media use on the perceptual gap (Lee & Tambourini, 2005: 297), additional aspects beyond the mere amount of usage should be considered. Finally, in his study on TPE of political advertising, Meirick (2004) suggested that political predispositions may guide respondents’ perceptions of candidates.

To analyze both the perceptual and behavioural component of TPE in the field of political communication in Germany, we developed a research model which integrates the main constructs outlined above (see Fig. 1). The core of the model is established by the basic indicator of the perceptual hypothesis – the assessment of media influence on oneself (first person; ‘I’), on people in one’s closer environment (second person; ‘you’), and on the general public (third person; ‘they’). This terminology follows the original notion by Davison (1983: 3) which expresses social distance in terms of generality. As a consequence, the difference between the individual assessment and the second person assessment constitutes a respondent’s second person perception<sup>1</sup> (in relation to self), and respectively the difference between the individual assessment and the third person assessment constitutes a respondent’s third person perception (in relation to self).

[about here: Fig. 1]

Taking content desirability variations into account, both types of perception may vary in the field of political communication if respondents are advised to estimate the effects of different types of media content. We identified six different sources of political information based on earlier research and our observation of the campaign on occasion of the German Federal elections in 2002. Rather than collecting individual ratings of desirability, we grouped the sources as exerting a desirable impact, ambivalent and an undesirable impact according to their credibility and intention

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that this terminology follows the grammar use of ‘second person’; see Jensen & Hurley (2005: 252) for a similar application. Other authors (e. g. Neuwirth & Frederick 2002) used the term ‘second-person effect’ differently.

to persuade as suggested by Brosius and Engel (1996: 143). Thus, we classified political news or features and interviews with politicians as content desirable for opinion building, while political advertising represented an undesirable message (p. 153). The same is true for the publication of polling results which were judged as almost as harmful to the electoral process as negative political ads in earlier research (Rucinski & Salmon, 1990: 355 & Table 1). This study ranked the TV debates of the candidates as less harmful, but recent research on debate perception in Germany proved some suspicion of voters towards this format of conveying politics (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2005). So we decided to put German TV debates in the ambivalent media type group, as well as the individual's debates with friends; in this case, no evidence of their desirability was available which is no surprise as desirability will vary with the single discussion and the persons actually involved.

These overall 12 perception differentials (six types of content by two social distance measures) can, following the original TPE concept, be assumed to influence respondent's behaviour. Or to be more precisely: respondent's behavioural intentions, as all empirical studies on TPE (including the present one) do not measure overt behaviour but ask people whether they would exert carry out a certain action if asked to (e. g. signing a petition for censorship; Gunther, 1995). Accordingly, in the field of politics the possible behavioural intentions caused by the perceptual gaps might include the support of voting restrictions for certain groups (as a pendant to censorship support). On the other hand, no evidence exists whether perceptual differences might account for actions related to the own behaviour rather than a more general call for administrative action. Possible constructs in this respect include the efforts a person makes for his or her individual voting decision, and one's political efficacy (in contrast to the concept of Internet self-efficacy introduced by Lee & Tambourini, 2005). The concepts of 'impersonal impact' and 'self-serving bias' (see above) would suggest that people with distinct perceptual gaps are also more willing to prospect individual action in order to maintain their positive self-image.

In the case of political content, the media impact perception differentials themselves may be influenced by several constructs: Among the moderating factors, media use of the respondent yielded a limited explanatory power in the past, why we suggest to include measures of media image and perceived media bias in our model. First, the 'generalized attitude' (Brosius & Engel, 1996: 148-149) that German media report in a credible and objective way on politics may trigger theoretical processes addressed by the 'unrealistic optimism' explanation of the TPE (Gunther &

Mundy, 1993; see above). If there is a tendency of individuals to hold a more favourite opinion of themselves and to attribute negative circumstances preferably to others, a negative image of mass media coverage should increase the perceptual gap as they should believe that they are too smart for being influenced by 'bad' media. Strictly speaking, this variable represents a generalized but individual-level variation on the desirability distinctions with regard to the different types of media content. Accordingly, a media bias perceived in comparison to one's own political position might cause the same mechanism.

With regard to media impact on political attitudes of people, one might argue that their political involvement should determine at least partly their assumptions on self and other's vulnerability. If their cognitive schemata regarding current events are more developed, they can assume that they are more resistant against media influence. Indicators for a fostered perspective on politics are – beyond an explicit party affiliation – their degrees of political knowledge and interest. Particularly in a campaign situation, this assumption can be put down to a voter's familiarity with the setting: We expect that first-time voters have had little opportunity yet to develop any feeling of superiority, while experienced voters, reinforced by the factor age (see above), should report a larger gap in assumed media effect on self and others.

Another personal characteristic that might account for TPE is education as pointed out earlier. Additionally, the general worldview of a person should as well be related to his or her reflection of 'unrealistic optimism. Being related to (but not identical with) education, the personality strength of an individual, indicating general opinion leadership, has proven to be a relevant trait in explaining media effects (e. g. Schenk & Roessler, 1997) and thus can as well play a role for media effects perception.

This model implies several hypothesis on the occurrence of TPE in the field of political communication, and furthermore it addresses additional research question where earlier research does not suggest a specific relationship between the constructs. We specified some of these for an empirical test on occasion of the German Federal elections in 2002. First of all, before analyzing the TPE process in detail, the basic perceptual hypothesis of TPE needs to be confirmed for the German public.



H1: People expect a higher impact of political media coverage on others than on themselves (perceptual gap).

Earlier research suggests that this perceptual gap will vary with the social distance of the comparison group and with the desirability of the media content, while the interaction patterns of both variables are unclear.

H2: The perceptual gap increases with an increasing distance between self and the comparison group; it will be larger for third-person perceptions of an impact on a general public and smaller for second-perceptions referring to friends and acquaintances.

H3: The perceptual gap increases with a decreasing desirability of a media effect; it will be highest for media content where an effect is undesirable, smaller for ambivalent types of media content, and negligible or even reversed when a media impact is desirable.

RQ1: Is there an interaction between the influence of social distance and message desirability?

A second step in TPE research addresses the behavioural intentions related with the perceptual gap. While support for restrictive measures was prevalent in some of the earlier empirical research, we suggest an analogy to individual behavioural intentions.

H4: With an increasing perceptual gap, a person's willingness to support voting restrictions for certain groups of voters increases.

H5: With an increasing perceptual gap, a person's own efforts for political decision-making increase.

H6: With an increasing perceptual gap, a person's feeling of political efficacy increases.

In the case of campaigns and ballots, people's age becomes relevant as it corresponds with their previous experiences in the process of voting. Accordingly, earlier TPE research suggests that the perceptual differences would be larger for older persons; young voters who are called to the ballots for the first time may have less experience with the outcome of elections and the role of

media in this process. This could find expression in a more homogenous view of the audience with regard to media effects.

H7: First-time voters and experienced voters differ in the magnitude of TPE; perceptual gaps should be larger and resulting behavioural intentions more conclusive for experienced voters.

Finally, the role of media use and evaluation, political involvement other personal traits is open for discussion, leading to a second research question:

RQ2: How do media use patterns, general media image, indicators for political involvement, and general personal traits influence the magnitude of perceptual differences concerning media impact?

These seven hypothesis and two research questions will be elaborated on considering possible cultural differences evoked by distinctions between the U.S. and Germany with respect to their media and political system.

### Method and Proceedings

Before the model suggested above could be tested with a survey among German voters, a preliminary step was necessary to rule out a simple learning effect from the mass media causing TPE perceptions: There exists a remote possibility that media coverage itself consists of exhaustive reports on the effects of mass media in the political sphere. In this case, a content analysis of coverage is required, in order to determine whether reports have indicated a substantial media impact on large parts of the audience. If so, perceptual differences might not be the result of psychological processes of social comparison but a mere learning from the media. Although this option is usually neglected by TPE studies based on the implicit assumption that no factual source for people's assertions of media effects exists, we decided to monitor political coverage previous to our survey. During the eight weeks preceding the fieldwork, we collected eight leading German

newspapers and political magazines<sup>2</sup> and taped the 27 hours of TV news and political features<sup>3</sup> on German networks.

The results of this monitoring procedure, which cannot be presented in detail here, justify the notion that TPE may occur: Despite the trend of self-reference within the media system, coverage contained almost no assertions of possible media effects during the campaign, except from assumptions about debate impact on viewers. Altogether, we found not more than 27 reports (and only one on TV) which explicitly specified media effects on the political decision-making of the audience. Based on these facts, simple learning effects based on media coverage about media impact may be ruled out.

Consequently, a survey was carried out among German voters between September 23 and September 29, 2002 which was the one-week period immediately after the election Sunday. Although a main purpose of the study was to determine the informational and voting behaviour of Germans who did not stay in Germany during the final phase of the campaign (see Roessler, 2003), the study also collected data on the third-person perceptions and of several types of media content. Overall, 423 face-to-face interviews with German voters were conducted by 40 students of media and communications in several vacation spots on the coast of Northern Spain along the Mediterranean Sea. Respondents were recruited in public spaces (on the beach, in restaurants and cafeterias or on the beach promenade), thus constituting a convenience sample with the results not claiming to be representative for the German electorate. Nevertheless, students were required to contact at least ten respondents following a quota plan which overrepresented the group of first-time voters.

A sample description is provided in the appendix and reveals that 39.5 percent of participants (n = 167) qualified as first-time voters in the Federal elections aged 21 and younger. Another 253 interviewees were classified as experienced voters older than 21. Compared to the German population, the share of male respondents is slightly higher, particularly among the experienced voters. In this group, educational levels are distributed rather equally, while first-time voters are

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<sup>2</sup> The selection included *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, *Frankfurter Rundschau*, *Die Tageszeitung* (quality press), *BILD* (tabloid press), *Der Spiegel*, *Focus*, *Die Zeit* (weeklies).

<sup>3</sup> We monitored the nationwide networks ARD, ZDF, RTL, SAT1 and VOX.

better educated than average in this group.<sup>4</sup> The share of respondents from former East Germany is similar in both parts of the sample and corresponds with their actual share in the population. Almost every interviewee claimed that he or she had participated in the elections by absentee ballot which has grown to be a rather familiar behaviour in Germany during the recent years. But compared to the actual voter turnout of 79,1 percent, we argue that social desirability has biased the respondents' answers in this respect. The political position of our interviewees, recorded on a scale between 0 and 100, was 45 in average ( $SD = 18$ ) and approached the centre of the scale, expressing the German voter's orientation towards a political mainstream. Nevertheless, a majority of respondents supported the ruling chancellor Gerhard Schröder, leading candidate of the Social Democrats and latter winner of the election. Three out of four interviewees were willing to reveal their vote, and accordingly first time voters tended to support the ruling coalition of social democrats and the Green party. This corresponds with official statistics where these parties as well gathered a larger share in the group of voters between 18 and 25 years (Hahlen, 2003). However, the conservative CDU/CSU does not reach its actual share in our sample of experienced voters while the social democrats are somewhat overrepresented. Altogether, the present sample differs in some respects from the general German electorate but portrays the groups of first-time and experienced voters rather accurately with only minor exceptions. As the reported differences to population statistics are, in our view, not substantial and TPE survey studies on a similar data grounds often provided relevant insight (recently e. g. Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Lee & Tamborini, 2005) we maintain that the present quota-based convenience sample is suited to test our hypothesis (and especially H7).<sup>5</sup>

In average, each interview took appr. 30 minutes and contained questions on respondent's media use, their political attitudes and behaviour, the second- and third-person perceptions and some personal characteristics. The constructs specified in our research model (see Figure 1) were operationalized as follows:

Perceptual variables. The assessment of media influenced followed the traditional proceeding in earlier TPE studies. Respondents were first asked to estimate the influence of each of six types of

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<sup>4</sup> This fact can be traced back to the scheduling of the elections which was not during regular vacation times. As a consequence, younger Germans encountered in holiday resorts were predominantly students during their fall break. For similar reasons, families with school children are underrepresented within our sample. Both sample limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the results of our study.

<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, we point out that in a strict statistical sense the significance coefficients given in the following do not express the generalizability of results to a larger population of German voters but serve as mere indicators of relevance.

mass media content (political news and features; interviews with politicians, debates with friends, TV debates of candidates, polling results, political advertising) on their voting decision, based on a scale between 0 (no influence at all) and 100 (very strong influence).<sup>6</sup> As earlier research could not prove any effects of different types of question wording (Brosius & Engel, 1996), we opted for a phrase with the individual as the object of media impact. In a subsequent part of the questionnaire, the same estimation was collected for the general population and in turn for one's own friends and family (see Brosius & Engel, 1996 for similar operationalizations of social distance). The order of sources was randomized to prevent sequence effects, while the order of perceptual questions was held constant as previous research has shown that the perceptual hypothesis of TPE is not influenced by the placement of self-other questions (Dupagne et al., 1999). The six second-person perception differentials and the six third-person perception differentials were calculated by subtracting the impact value on self from the respective value for the comparison group. Thus, positive differential values indicate a perceptual bias as proposed by the second- and third-person metaphor. Negative values then indicate reversed TPE (Perloff, 1993: 170) or, in other terms, a first-person effect on self.

**Behavioural intentions.** The call for collective action dimension of the behavioural component was represented by a question on people's support for a change of German Federal law that should make the right to vote dependent on a minimum level of political knowledge and interest.<sup>7</sup> The individual action dimension consisted of two constructs: First, to assess their made efforts for decision-making respondents were asked whether they had participated in a set of eight political activities<sup>8</sup> which were then condensed by an additive index (ranging from 0 to 8). Second, an index

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<sup>6</sup> Question wording (translated from German): "Please consider your relationship to mass media now. According to your opinion, how much was your political attitude and voting decision affected by the following sources? Please rate on a scale between 0 (no impact at all) and 100 (very strong impact)." Sources rated: (1) political news and features; (2) interviews with politicians, (3) debates with friends, (4) TV debates of candidates, (5) polling results, (6) political advertising.

<sup>7</sup> Question wording (translated from German): "Currently a suggestion is discussed to change electoral law in Germany. Only those persons should be allowed to vote who prove a certain minimum of political knowledge and interest. What do you think of this idea?" Answer items: (1) totally agree, (2) agree on principle, (3) don't care, (4) rather disagree, (5) disagree completely.

<sup>8</sup> Options: (1) distributing material for a party, (2) tried to convince friends and family to go to the ballots, (3) advocated one's political opinion in public, (4) read party programmes, (5) read party brochures and flyers (6) attended campaign conventions, (7) tried to convince friends and family of my political opinion, (8) read homepages of politicians and parties on the Internet.

of political efficacy was compiled from the answers on four individual assertions regarding the own influence on the political process (ranging from 4 to 20).<sup>9</sup>

Media-related variables. For newspapers and weekly magazines, news and features on TV and radio, and the Internet respectively a self-estimation was recorded how often respondents use those sources to obtain political information.<sup>10</sup> The generalized attitude towards media was determined by the answers on six items referring to objectivity and credibility of media coverage summarized by an additive index (ranging from 6 to 30).<sup>11</sup> A perceived media bias was revealed by collecting an assertion of media's political position in general which was then subtracted from the value for one's own political position on the same scale.<sup>12</sup> The magnitude of this difference (regardless of its direction) expresses the degree of how much the interviewee perceives the media to report differently from his or her own political perspective.

Political involvement. In contrast to political action related to the campaign (see above: behavioural intentions), we operationalized political involvement by three constructs: First, party affiliation consisted of respondent's agreement to five statements referring to the individual relevance of the preferred party (index value ranging from 0 to 16).<sup>13</sup> As mere party membership is not very common in Germany and only a superficial indicator, affiliation was hence expressed by an additive index (ranging from 5 to 25). Second, political knowledge consisted of a self-assessment on five dimensions, covering factual knowledge and knowledge compared to others;<sup>14</sup> again, we

<sup>9</sup> Statement wording (translated from German): (1) "No matter if I go to the ballots or not, this has no influence on what politicians are doing." (2) "During campaigns, politicians promise a lot they do not remember any more after the elections." (3) "The electorate was able to make a well-thought-out decision for these elections." (4) "As voters we have proven with these elections that we can take responsibility for the future of our country." Answers on a five-point scale (1 = agree; 5 = disagree), additive index with reversed scale for items (3) and (4).

<sup>10</sup> Scale between 0 (never) and 4 (daily, almost daily).

<sup>11</sup> Statement wording (translated from German): (1) "The media draw an authentic picture of political life in Germany." (2) "Media depict political processes comprehensively and truthfully." (3) "Political coverage in Germany is generally balanced, giving voice to different opinions and perspectives." (4) "Media usually pursue their own political interests." (5) "Important media have intentionally reported with a bias during the campaign." (6) "One should be sceptical towards media and always question their coverage." Statements rotated randomly, answers on a five-point scale (1 = agree; 5 = disagree), additive index with reversed scale for items (1) to (3).

<sup>12</sup> Question wording (translated from German): "In politics, we often differentiate between more left-wing and more right-wing positions. Please rate the position of German media in general referring to this range from left to right. Where would you locate the majority of German media outlets on a scale between 0 (left) and 100 (right)?"

<sup>13</sup> Statement dimensions: (1) Individual relevance of the preferred party, (2) orientation function of the party, (3) agreement with positions of the party, (4) voting for the party in recent elections. Statements rotated randomly, answers on a five-point scale (0 = none; 4 = high).

<sup>14</sup> Statement wording (translated from German): (1) "I am not very familiar with the political system of Germany." (2) "I know the names of leading politicians in Germany." (3) "Usually, I am well-informed about current political events." (4)

formed an additive index of these answers (ranging from 5 to 25). Third, political interest was measured with a single question asking for the respondent's interest in the recent campaign (scale between 0 = no interest at all and 10 = very strong interest).

Personal characteristics. The distinction between first-time voters and experienced voters was made on the basis of respondent's age, as election law in Germany allows voting for anyone aged 18 and higher. Consequently, anyone aged 21 and less had no opportunity so far to participate in a Federal election and was thus labelled as a novice. The education scale consisted of the usual items for the German school system (as translated to American standards in the Appendix). The personality strength scale was applied according to its original formulation by Noelle-Neumann (1985; for the English translation see Weimann, 1994: 256). A set of thirteen personality traits<sup>15</sup> was integrated into an index value with every item weighted by a validated procedure (ranging from 101 to 198).

## Results

A prerequisite for any further analysis on the TPE is the existence of the basic perceptual gap between self and others. As predicted by H1, all twelve differential values are positive, indicating that respondents predominantly attribute higher media effects on others than on self (see Table 1). As many other studies before, our data support once more the general notion underlying the TPE. The same is true for the social distance assumption (H2): For all six types of media content, the perceptual gap is larger for third-person perceptions than for second-person perceptions, and the differences are highly significant in all cases. Respondents believe that the general public is more susceptible to media effects, compared to their friends and family members.

[about here: Table 1]

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"I think that I am better informed about politics than most of my friends and family members." (5) "I think that I am better informed about politics than most people in Germany." Statements rotated randomly, answers on a five-point scale (1 = agree; 5 = disagree), additive index with reversed scale for items (2) to (5).

<sup>15</sup> Agreement with the following statements: (1) I usually count on being successful in everything I do. (2) I am rarely unsure about how I should behave. (3) I like to assume responsibility. (4) I like to take the lead when a group does things together. (5) I enjoy convincing others of my opinions. (6) I often notice that I serve as a model for others. (7) I am good at getting what I want. (8) I am often a step ahead of others. (9) I own many things others envy me for. (10) I often give others advice and suggestions. (11) Holder of a leading position in a profession/being a superior. (12) Participation in political party/trade union citizen's action group in leisure time. (13) Office held in a club or organization.

Evidence is more complicated with the desirability of messages expectation (H3). The two types of political media content defined as desirable (political news and features, interviews with politicians) indeed display the smallest gaps among all differentials, and the values for potentially undesirable impact sources (political advertising, polling results) are substantially higher. These results confirm our assumptions based on earlier research. But the two message types classified as ambivalent are not positioned between desirable and undesirable sources; instead, each of them joins the two extremes: Debates with friends and family members evoke only small differences between the impact perceived on others and on self, making it an almost desirable kind of influence. But much to our surprise, TV debates of candidates are, despite their strictly regulated staging, seen as highly influential on others. The differential values even exceed those of political advertising. As negative campaigning is not very popular in Germany so far, televised debates of the leading candidates seemingly represent the type of political communication which is attributed a high potential for manipulating the electorate.

[about here: Figure 2]

The interactions between social distance and impact desirability in TPE perceptions are illustrated in Figure 2. Although the relations are not linear in all cases, the different levels of differentials do not encourage speculations that certain combinations of message type and comparison group systematically stimulate perceptual gaps more than others. At least based on our data, the answer in the negative on RQ1 has to be preliminary and needs further elaboration from future empirical work.

A set of three hypothesis specified the role of perceptual gaps for behavioural intentions of respondents. We tested the influence of all twelve difference values on the collective action and both individual action variable by means of linear regression analysis (see Table 2). The results are disappointing at least – the variance explained by the independent variables is small, and beta values are distributed unsystematically. Support for voting restrictions increases when people assume that personal discussions and TV debates have a higher impact on the general public on self, when they believe that political advertising influences their friends more strongly, but decreases when TV



debates are perceived to effect their close acquaintances. Efforts for decision-making on the other hand are intensified when debates with friends and interviews with politicians seem to influence self stronger than the general public, but at the same time when debates with friends are perceived to influence others more than self. Finally, political efficacy increases when people feel that political news and features have a high impact on them compared to the general public. But it is difficult to make sense of these singular relationships, adding another lack of evidence for the behavioural component of TPE to the existing research literature.

[about here: Table 2]

Voting experience was introduced in our study on political TPE effects as a specification of the usual age variable (H7). We expected larger perceptual gaps for experienced voters, and this is true for ten of the twelve differentials calculated in this study, five of them being statistically significant (see again Table 1). It seems as if first-time voters hold the opinion that they differ less from others in their vulnerability to media impact – an attitude which changes over the years. By and large, the first part of H7 is supported by our result; for the second part of H7 which addresses the behavioural component we found no support (data not shown). Just as for the sample as a whole, regressions in both groups of voters did not yield any substantial results.

Our final research question asked whether media use patterns, indicators for political involvement, and general personal traits influence the magnitude of perceptual gaps. For an easier understanding we summed up the six differentials for political sources to a single index value for second-person perceptions (SPP) and third-person perceptions (TPP). Pearson correlations show that two constructs are related to both sorts of gaps: With increasing education, perceptual differences decrease (SPP: -.11; TPP: -.21) which is in contrast to earlier research but supports the only other TPE from Germany (Brosius & Engel, 1996). And a perceived media bias enhances SPP and TPP, as people believe media effects on others to increase when they see the media's position apart from their own (SPP: .16; TPP: .17). Moreover, a positive image of media reduces a perceived media impact on the general public (TPP: -.11). Media use and political involvement variables display some significant correlations for single types of political communication sources, but as some are positive and some are negative, they level out in one index. Again, evidence is too weak for an in-

depth analysis, but we may record that personality strength, use of audiovisual media, and political interest are seemingly unrelated to SPP and TPP, while print media and Internet use, and particularly party affiliation and political knowledge are correlated with some of the differentials.

### Conclusions

The aim of our study was to analyze second- and third-person effects of several political communication sources, including their consequences for behavioural intentions and with particular emphasis on the role of voting experience for people's perceptions. Its main results can be summarized in the following:

1. The perceptual component of the TPE concept was supported throughout. Representing the second TPE study (succeeding the Brosius & Engel work from the 1990s) and the first field study in Germany, the basic assumption of perceptual differences between media impact on self and others seems to be unaffected by the cultural background of both countries. Furthermore, the social distance hypothesis is confirmed for all types of media content, giving reason to the 'impersonal impact' background of the TPE concept. Nevertheless, we cannot rule out that what we operationalized as social distance is in fact the effect inferences of how likely the comparison groups are to be exposed to the media content in question (Eveland et al., 1999).

2. We confirmed the important part the type of media message plays for the magnitude of perceptual gaps. While undesirable impact yields larger differentials, desirable impact in our case did not evoke reversed but substantially smaller differentials. However, our results should remind that any classification of messages as desirable or not might be misleading – other than expected, German voters saw TV debates of leading candidates as highly influential on others.

3. On the other hand, evidence for the effect of perceptual gaps on behavioural intentions was limited. The mixed evidence encountered in earlier research led scholars to question the perceptual difference being an appropriate predictor variable for individual behaviour (Tewksbury et al., 2004). Instead, the presumed behaviour of others was seen as an obvious influence, but empirical proof for that relationship was also rather weak (Jensen & Hurley, 2005: 250). In our case, may be the collective action construct was operationalized inadequately for the field of political communication where supporting voting restrictions for certain groups of people might be not tolerable for an informed citizen. On the other hand, the individual action variables addressed behavioural intentions

that are obviously unrelated to TPE perceptions, which also supports the ‘impersonal impact’ background indirectly.

4. When media impact on political assessments is concerned, personal characteristics (such as the individual voting experience) need to be taken into account. Effects perceptions depend on people’s life experiences rather than on coverage on effects in the media themselves. Other traits such as party affiliation or political knowledge influence respondent’s perceived vulnerability to media impact.

Altogether, our study adds some evidence to the understanding of TPE mechanisms. Beyond the conclusion that the TPE framework may fruitfully be adopted for other societies than the U.S., it demonstrated the need for further research on the implications of TPE in the realm of political decision-making. People hold certain opinions on the way others seem to build their political attitude, but the relevance of these perceptions for public opinion is still unclear.

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## Appendix: Sample description by voting experience (percentages and mean values)

	first time voters ( $\leq 21$ y.) n = 167	experienced voters ( $> 21$ y.) n = 256	sample total n = 423
gender			
female	51 %	44 %	47 %
male	49 %	56 %	53 %
education			
secondary school and less	12 %	26 %	21 %
...high school	84 %	27 %	50 %
college degree	--	14 %	9 %
vocational training	3 %	31 %	20 %
former East German citizen	15 %	17 %	16 %
political position			
left (0) – right (100), mean value	41 (SD = 17)	49 (SD = 18)	45 (SD = 18)
preferred candidate			
Schröder (incumbent chancellor)	69 %	55 %	61 %
Stoiber (opposition leader)	16 %	33 %	26 %
none of them	15 %	12 %	13 %
voter turnout	88 %	97 %	93 %
voting decision	(n = 133)	(n = 182)	(n = 315)
CDU/CSU (concernative)	17 %	32 %	26 %
...SPD (social democrats)	44 %	41 %	43 %
FDP (liberals)	9 %	8 %	9 %
Grüne (Green party)	21 %	10 %	15 %
PDS (former GDR Socialist Unity Party)	5 %	4 %	4 %
...other	3 %	4 %	3 %

Figure 1: A model of second- and third-person effects in political communication

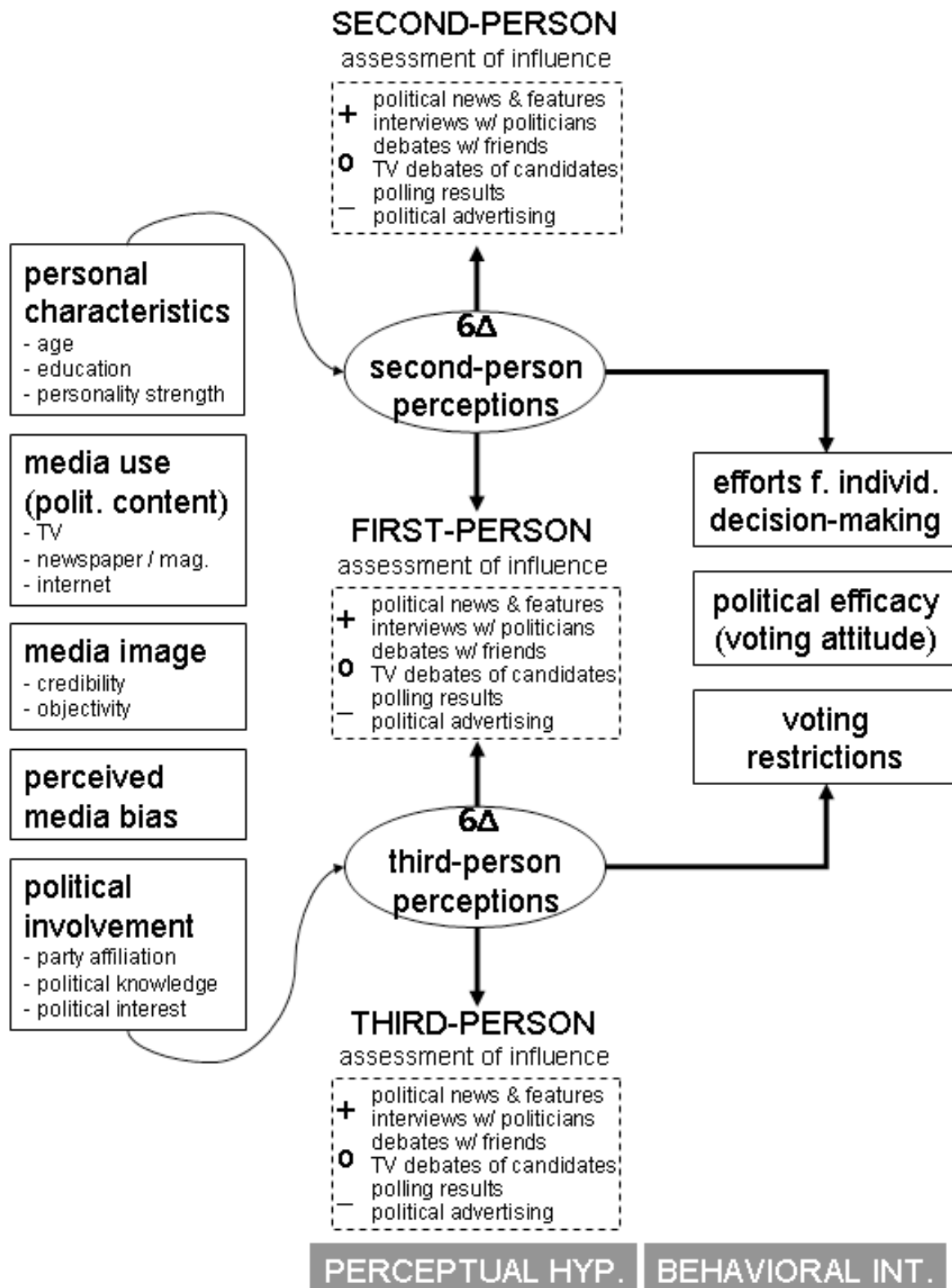


Table 1: Second- and third-person perception differentials for different types of political sources

	second person perception			third person perception		
	all respondents (n = 415)	first-time voters (n = 166)	experienced voters (n = 249)	all respondents (n = 415)	first-time voters (n = 166)	experienced voters (n = 249)
political news and features	3,3 (28,3)	- 0,3 (27,4)	5,8 (28,7) <sup>+</sup>	11,0 (29,9) ***	5,7 (25,9)	14,5 (32,0) <sup>++</sup>
interviews with politicians	3,9 (27,1)	3,1 (24,7)	4,4 (28,6)	7,7 (30,1) **	5,2 (28,1)	9,4 (31,4)
debates with friends	7,0 (26,1)	2,9 (25,5)	9,8 (26,2) <sup>++</sup>	10,5 (27,5) **	4,3 (24,9)	14,7 (10,5) <sup>+++</sup>
TV debates of candidates	15,2 (29,5)	15,0 (30,1)	15,4 (29,11)	32,9 (30,2) ***	31,9 (31,9)	33,7 (29,1)
polling results	10,2 (23,2)	12,1 (21,5)	8,9 (24,3)	22,6 (24,7) ***	22,7 (22,3)	22,5 (25,2)
political advertising	6,6 (21,7)	4,5 (19,3)	8,1 (23,3)	23,3 (23,7) ***	20,2 (23,3)	25,3 (23,8) <sup>+</sup>

Mean values between -100 and +100; SD in brackets.

All respondents: differences between second- and third-person effects: \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$ .

Voter group: differences between first time and experienced voters: <sup>+++</sup>  $p < .001$ ; <sup>++</sup>  $p < .01$ ; <sup>+</sup>  $p < .05$ .



Figure 2: Interaction in perceptual gaps between social distance and message type (n = 415)

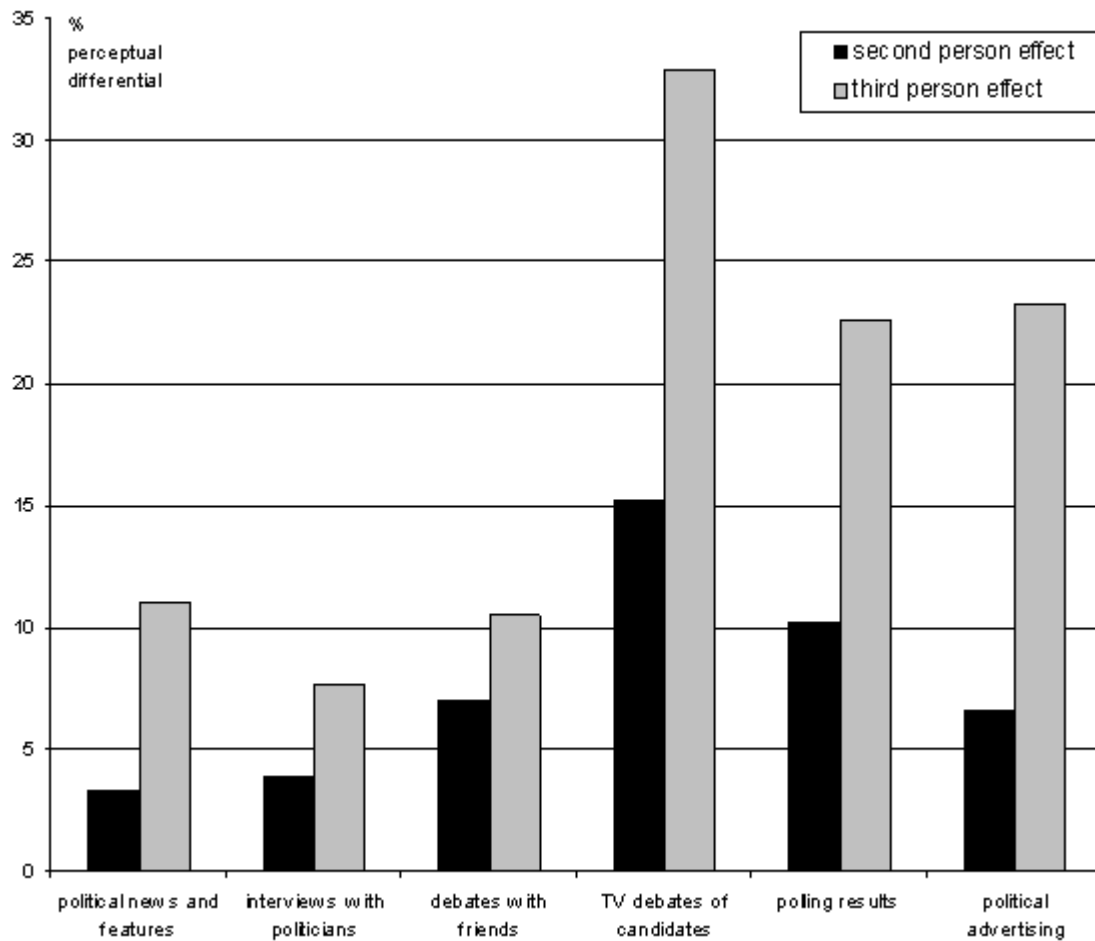


Table 2: Linear Regressions of second- and third-person perception differentials for different types of political sources on behavioural intentions

	support for voting restrictions	efforts for decision- making	political efficacy
Second-person perceptions			
• political news and features			
• interviews with politicians			
• debates with friends		.33	
• TV debates of candidates	-.21		
• polling results			
• political advertising	.15		
Third-person perceptions			
• political news and features			-.17
• interviews with politicians		-.17	
• debates with friends	.21	-.32	
• TV debates of candidates	.23		
• polling results			
• political advertising			
n	356	338	335
R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.05	.04
F-value	1.51 (n.s.)	2.45 **	2.08 *

Entries are standardized beta values with  $p < .05$  only.